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Expert view

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The emergence of COVID-19, in late December 2019 and the resulting pandemic¹, reflects Laurie Garrett's thesis in her book 'The Coming Plague, Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance'². She proposes that it is the loss of habitat and global travel that provides an environment for novel infections to emerge, to be transmitted and for pandemics to occur. With people contracting the virus, becoming ill, experiencing morbidities and death, populations become overwhelmed by uncertainties and anxieties for their futures. It was into this mix, that the dental profession found itself in early 2020. Initial uncertainties of COVID-19 transmission, the role of AGPs, a scarcity of PPE, closed surgeries and anxieties regarding livelihoods, resulted in anecdotes of increased distress.

Therefore, this survey of 5,170 UK dentists, during the 3rd month of the first national lockdown, was timely. It showed that contrary to expectations dentists exhibited less distress. However, for those who were practice owners and whose NHS commitment was up to 49%, they reported high levels of distress. For some dentists the release from practice was welcomed whereas for others, uncertainties of their financial situation, fears of bankruptcy and anxieties for family life were often mentioned. A deterioration of mental health functioning was noted. Distrust of regulatory bodies, public perceptions of the profession and worries of an uncertain future were commonplace. A call to support practitioners with 'reduced patient numbers but increased costs' and to monitor mental health status was made.

Regulatory and professional bodies must take heed of this call and devise support structures to enable the profession to continue to provide high quality care. Deaneries as part of their duty of care to those in training and in practice must construct interventions to monitor and promote mental health in all members of the dental team. The uncertainties and anxieties made manifest in the profession by the COVID-19 pandemic has critically exposed the difficulties experienced by the profession. It's time for action. The regulatory and professional bodies and the Deaneries must act now and support those who provide the oral health care for our population.

References

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